

Sandburg, Carl

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Poets

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Lincoln Poetry

Poets

Carl Sandburg

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

The Long Shadow of Lincoln

☆ A LITANY BY CARL SANDBURG

We can succeed only by concert. . . . The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves. . . . *December 1, 1862. The President's Message to Congress.*

BE SAD, be cool, be kind,
Remembering those now dream-dust
Hallowed in the ruts and gullies,
Solemn bones under the smooth blue sea,
Faces war-blown in a falling rain.

Be a brother, if so can be,
To those beyond battle fatigue
Each in his own corner of earth
Or forty fathoms undersea
Beyond all boom of guns,
Beyond any bong of a great bell,
Each with a bosom and number,
Each with a pack of secrets,
Each with a personal dream and doorway,
And over them now the long endless winds
With the low healing song of time,
The hush and sleep murmur of time.
Make your wit a guard and cover.
Sing low, sing high, sing wide.
Let your laughter come free
Remembering looking toward peace:
We must disenthrall ourselves."

Be a brother, if so can be,
To those thrown forward
For taking hard-won lines,
For holding hard-won points
And their reward so-so.
Little they care to talk about,

Their pay held in a mute calm,
High-spot memories going unspoken;
What they did being past words,
What they took being hard won.
Be sad, be kind, be cool.
Weep if you must,
And weep, open and shameless,
Before these altars.

There are wounds past words.
There are cripples less broken
Than many who walk whole.
There are dead youths
With wrists of silence
Who keep a vast music
Under their shut lips;
What they did being past words;
Their dreams, like their deaths,
Beyond any smooth and easy telling;
Having given till no more to give.

There is dust alive
With dreams of the Republic,
With dreams of the family of man
Flung wide on a shrinking globe;
With old timetables,
Old maps, old guideposts
Torn into shreds,
Shot into tatters,
Burnt in a fire wind,

Lost in the shambles,
Faded in rubble and ashes.

There is dust alive.
Out of a granite tomb,
Out of a bronze sarcophagus,
Loose from the stone and copper
Steps a white-smoke ghost,
Lifting an authoritative hand
In the name of dreams worth dying for
In the name of men whose dust breath
Of those dreams so worth dying for;
What they did being past words,
Beyond all smooth and easy telling.

Be sad, be kind, be cool,
Remembering, under God, a dream-du
Hallowed in the ruts and gullies,
Solemn bones under the smooth blue se
Faces war-blown in a falling rain.

Sing low, sing high, sing wide.
Make your wit a guard and cover.
Let your laughter come free
Like a help and a brace of comfort.

The earth laughs, the sun laughs
Over every wise harvest of man,
Over man looking toward peace
By the light of the hard old teachin
"We must disenthrall ourselves."

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How Sandburg Quoted Lincoln in "The People, Yes"

From "Complete Poems" by Carl Sandburg, Reprinted by Special Arrangement

With Harcourt, Brace and Co.

Lincoln?

He was a mystery in smoke and flags
saying yes to the smoke, yes to the flags,
yes to the paradoxes of democracy,
yes to the hopes of government
of the people by the people for the people,
no to debauchery of the public mind,
no to personal malice nursed and fed,
yes to the Constitution when a help,
no to the Constitution when a hindrance,
yes to man as a struggler amid illusions,
each man fated to answer for himself:
Which of the failhs and illusions of man-
kind

must I choose for my own sustaining light
to bring me beyond the present wilderness?

Lincoln? was he a poet?
and did he write verses?

"I have not willingly planted a thorn
in any man's
bosom."

"I shall do nothing
through malice;
what I deal with
is too vast for
malice."



Abraham Lincoln

Death was in the air.
So was birth.
What was dying few
could say.
What was being born
none could know.

He took the wheel in a lashing roaring
hurricane.

And by what compass did he steer the
course of the ship?

"My policy is to have no policy," he
said in the early months.

And three years later, "I have been
controlled by events."

He could play with the wayward human
mind, saying at Charleston, Illinois,
September 18, 1858, it was no answer
to an argument to call a man a liar.

"I assert that you (pointing a finger in
the face of a man in the crowd) are
here today, and you undertake to prove
me a liar by showing that you were in
Mattoon yesterday.

"I say that you took your hat off your
head and you prove me a liar by putting
it on your head."

He saw personal liberty across wide
horizons.

"Our progress in degeneracy appears to
me to be pretty rapid," he wrote Joshua
F. Speed, August 24, 1855. "As a nation
we began by declaring that 'all men are
created equal, except negroes.' When
the Know-Nothings get control, it will
read 'all men are created equal except
negroes and foreigners and Catholics.'
When it comes to this, I shall prefer
emigrating to some country where they
make no pretense of loving liberty."

Did he look deep into a crazy pool
and see the strife and wrangling
with a clear eye, writing the military
head of a storm-swept area:

"If both factions, or nelther, shall
abuse
you, you will probably be about right.
Beware of being assailed by one and
praised by the other"?

Lincoln? was he a historian?

did he know mass chaos?

did he have an answer for those

who asked him to organize chaos?

"Actual war coming, blood grows hot, and
blood is spilled. Thought is forced
from old channels into confusion. De-
ception breeds and thrives. Confidence
dies and universal suspicion reigns.

"Each man feels an impulse to kill his
neighbor, lest he be first killed by him.
Revenge and retaliation follow. And all
this, as before said, may be among hon-
est men only; but this is not all.

"Every foul bird comes abroad and every
dirty reptile rises up. These add crime
to confusion.

"Strong measures, deemed indispensable,
but harsh at best, such men make worse
by maladministration. Murders for old
grudges, and murders for pelf, proceed
under any cloak that will best cover for
the occasion. These causes amply ac-
count for what has happened in Mis-
souri."

Early in '64 the Committee of the New
York Workingman's Democratic Repub-
lican Association called on him with
assurances and he meditated aloud for
them, recalling race and draft riots:

"The most notable feature of a distur-
bance in your city last summer was the
hanging of some working people by
other working people. It should never
be so.

"The strongest bond of human sympathy,
outside of the family relation, should be
one uniting all working people, of all
nations and tongues and kindreds.

"Let not him who is houseless pull down
the house of another, hut let him labor
diligently and build one for himself,
thus by example assuring that his own
shall be safe from violence when built."

Lincoln? did he gather

the feel of the American dream

and see its kindred over the earth?

"As labor is the common burden of our
race,
so the effort of some to shift
their share of the burden
onto the shoulders of others
is the great durable curse of the race."

"I hold,

If the Almighty had ever made a set of
men

that should do all of the eating
and none of the work,
he would have made them

with mouths only, and no hands;
and if he had ever made another class,
that he had intended should do all the
work
and none of the eating,
he would have made them
without mouths and all hands."

"—the same spirit that says, 'You toil and
work and earn bread, and I'll eat it.'
No matter in what shape it comes,
whether from the mouth of a king who
seeks to hestride the people of his own
nation and live by the fruit of their
labor, or from one race of men as an
apology for enslaving another race, it is
the same tyrannical principle."

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not
be a master. This expresses my idea of
democracy. Whatever differs from this,
to the extent of the difference, is no
democracy."

"I never knew a man who wished to be
himself a slave. Consider if you know
any good thing that no man desires for
himself."

"The sheep and the wolf

are not agreed up-
on a definition of
the word liberty."



Carl Sandburg

"How does it feel to
be President?" an Illinois friend asked.
"Well, I'm like the man they rode out of
town on a rail. He said if it wasn't for
the honor of it he would just as soon
walk."

Lincoln? He was a dreamer.

He saw ships at sea,
he saw himself living and dead
in dreams that came.

Into a secretary's diary December 23, 1863
went an entry: "The President tonight
had a dream. He was in a party of
plain people, and, as it became known
who he was, they began to comment on
his appearance. One of them said: 'He
is a very common-looking man.' The
President replied: 'The Lord prefers
common-looking people. That is the
reason he makes so many of them.'"

He spoke one verse for then and now:

"If we could first know where we are,
and whither we are tending,
and could better judge
what to do, and how to do it."

Carl Sandburg's daughter tends storehouse of the poet's work

By Charles Leroux

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA, Ill. — "She loves blood-red poppies for a garden to walk in," the poet wrote of his wife.

*"In a loose white gown she walks
and a new child tugs at cords in her body."*

The child was born June 3, 1911, and Carl and Lilian Sandburg named her Margaret. Now, 72 years later, mother and father are gone, but Margaret keeps the poetry flowing.

She recently drove (was driven, actually, as she has never gotten a license) from her home in Asheville, N.C., to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. In the trunk of the car was a cache of unpublished Carl Sandburg manuscripts, about 1,500 pages of material destined to join the university's Sandburg collection. It was not Margaret's first delivery and likely will not be her last because there are more manuscripts to be dealt with from a man who, she said, "never threw anything away."

Margaret, the eldest of three Sandburg children, all daughters, has devoted herself to harvesting the boxes and boxes of poems — some of them handwritten — children's stories, humorous writing, essays, historical pieces and letters her father left behind. There is even, in the latest batch she brought, a one-act play, the only one Sandburg wrote.

"Have you read that thing?" Margaret asked George Hendrick, the Illinois history professor with whom she edited the just-published Sandburg autobiography, *Ever the Winds of Chance* (University of Illinois Press, \$12.95). She made a face that showed she didn't think much of the play.

"Even if Father thought something was no good," she said, "he'd save it, hoping to improve on the idea. There's one file still in North Carolina marked, 'Please destroy on the event of my death.' I haven't decided what to do with that. There's nothing in there that isn't found elsewhere. Maybe he was just in a bad mood."

Nearly every folder presents decisions to be made, puzzles to be solved.

"You can't ever tell what you'll find," she said. "There will be envelopes labeled something but containing something else. He knew why he was putting in those things that don't seem to belong, but it can be difficult to see what he had in mind. One file was labeled 'IMPT,' but I can't see what's so important about its contents."

"Another thing he did was to change titles. A poem titled 'Soo Line Sue' showed up in another manuscript titled 'Leif Erickson.'"

There are other confusions. Sandburg, who had been a courthouse reporter for the *Chicago Daily News*, typed in a kind of shorthand. He left out some vowels; in the original manuscript for the first chapter of *Ever the Winds of Chance*, he wrote, "Th whole bldg torn dwn by thghtless pl nd scattered

nobdy rmbrs whr."

Margaret picked her way through the papers, figuring out that "pl" was people and that "the" was sometimes "t" and other times "th" but coming up blank on "mmmnn."

"Take a guess," she said to a group of puzzled-looking faces. "It's a word not used much nowadays, but he used it a lot; took a while for it to come to me — mammon, wealth, possessions."

Margaret was asked about the shorthand. Was it a sign of a man so bursting with ideas that he was in a rush to set them down?

"I don't know about that," she said, "but I do know he wrote every day, every day. At dinner, he'd read the family what he'd been working on or pieces he'd already finished. I remember him reading the 'Nut' proverbs [an example of an exercise he often engaged in — taking a simple object and exhausting its literary possibilities]. 'Fog' didn't hit me right when I first heard it, but 'Prairie' ['The prairie sings to me in the forenoon . . .'] I thought was beautiful. When he was working on *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, he'd talk about how much he disliked Gen. McClellan. We always knew what he was working on. He'd read in that musical voice of his. Mother called it 'resonant.'"

"Sometimes, he'd read other people's works. He liked Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard,' knew Whitman's 'Song of Myself' by heart. Imagine, 'Song of Myself' from memory! He didn't like Longfellow."

When she was 9, Margaret developed epilepsy. Not much was known about treatment for the disease then. Doctors tried keeping her awake for days at a time. They tried blindfolding her with a dinner napkin. The school said she was distracting other students, so Margaret left school to be taught by her mother.

When the next Sandburg daughter, Janet, was born, the parents worried because she hardly ever cried, didn't seem to react to her surroundings. Janet today lives still in a child's world. Hendrick thinks the health problems of two of Sandburg's three daughters helped fuel his terrific productivity, his constant writing, his lecture and singing tours.

Sandburg died in 1967, and since then Margaret has spent a good deal of her life looking after her father's fevered work. She is editing a volume of the love letters that passed between Carl and Lilian, 400 pages of letters written over the course of six months.

As was her father's habit, Margaret rises late in the day and works until the wee hours of morning, poring over the letters and other manuscripts.

"In your blue eyes, O reckless child," Sandburg wrote in a poem called, "Margaret,"

*"I saw today many little wild wishes,
Eager as the great morning."*

He might be pleased to know that, as she pores over his writing, Margaret's blue eyes are eager still.

Sandburg Asks Why U.S. Poets Today Ignore Lincoln as Source for Verse

By EVERETT S. ALLEN
Standard-Times Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Feb. 11—Abraham Lincoln's closest friend wants to know why American poets don't write about Lincoln any more. On the eve of Lincoln's birthday, Carl Sandburg, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of the nation's 16th President, remarked wistfully, "Thirty years ago, it was something of a custom to at least try to write poems about Lincoln, but now, the status is changed."

The white-haired Sandburg, 73, whose powerful poetry of, by and for the people has had its impact on American literature for much of the 20th Century, made his remarks at a unique dinner at which he was the guest of honor.

Voted No. 2

Broadcast Music Inc., which sponsors a nationwide Book Parade program, asked 300 professional reviewers across the country what five books they would take if stranded on a desert island. (The Bible was automatically included). With all the books of all time to choose from, Sandburg's "The War Years" was voted No. 2 on the list.

This was the four-volume series on Lincoln that won the Pulitzer award. Other books selected among the top five, indicative of the implied honor to Sandburg, included Tolstoi's "War and Peace," (1866-68); "Oxford Book of English Verse," (1900); Gibbons' "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," (1776-1788), and Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn," (1878-84).

Sandburg was the only living author among the first 21 selections; Winston Churchill was 22d.

The brilliance of phrase, the keenness of mind is still with the man who wrote "Chicago Poems." He still possesses a humanitarian-



CARL SANDBURG

ism that can become tumultuous, a peacefulness that can blaze. With the falling lock of hair, flat-carved planes of the open face, blue-serge suit and floppy bow tie, he has lost none of the perception or sensitivity that produced the "Corn Huskers," and "Slabs of the Sunburnt West."

Where Is Homer?

He talked about World War II as poetically as he has written about the Civil War. "Four-thousand ships," he said in rhythmic tones, "4,000 miles and 300,000 men to Okinawa. We have not yet appreciated the immensity of all this." Then, indicating there is something he does not find in American poetry today, he barked, "Where the hell is Homer?"

But mostly, he talked about his great love, Lincoln, and about "The War Years," and the 12 years he spent writing about them. And there was in his manner and tone an almost reverent, yet sometimes even comradely regard, both for the task and the man.

He wrote every day during these 12 years, except for three days when he had bronchial pneumonia. On the fourth day, he tried to get back to it, but the typewriter "started to float away," and he went back to bed.

"Sometimes I used to offer a silent prayer during those years. Like an Old Testament character, I used to say, 'If Thou will permit me to finish this task, then Thou may have me.'"

Lincoln a Comfort

"Finally, it got to where I knew it didn't need any more work from me. And then sometimes maybe the dark angel would come and say, 'You remember that prayer you made?' But it didn't happen . . ."

"The company of Lincoln nev-

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Sandburg Talks About Lincoln

(Continued from Page 1)

er wearied in all those years. His humor ranged from plain barnyard Rabelaisian to the thin ironies such as come from the lips of Jesus. I could not know any loneliness but what his loneliness was a comfort. Only Shakespeare had such a range of rich, healthy laughter and grief to the point of tears.

"He was the only President of the United States who was an authentic genius of the comic. And withal, he was a genuinely literary genius and a master politician. I often thought of men in politics in this country wondering what course they ought to steer. Men so often slip and lose what they have, but he kept his honesty across the long range of years.

"There was a grandeur, a beautiful intricacy in his political moves. On Dec. 1, 1862, for example, he sent what probably was his most cogent argument for any issue to the members of Congress. A clerk read it, undoubtedly monotonously. It was not until Wilson that a President went to read his message personally."

Asks to Buy Slaves

The Lincoln message asked Congress, among other items, to appropriate funds for the purchase of slaves in border States that had not seceded, prior to setting the slaves free. In part, the President's argument, as delivered without notes by Mr. Sandburg, said:

"Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this Administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it . . ."

Lincoln went on to say that the occasion "is piled high with difficulty and we must rise to it. We must disenthral ourselves."

"That," said Sandburg, "is the only time he ever used that ancient Anglo-Saxon word — enthralled bound to land. He was saying, 'Forget what you know. Break from tradition. Find new ideas to meet new problems.'

Something Is Missing

It was evident that Sandburg, whose singing lines and brawling phrases are in every American anthology, looks for something in contemporary poetry that he does not see.

With affection, he talked about the poets who have written of Lincoln, including Whitman, with whose works his own sometimes have been compared. "The dark music of Edwin Arlington Robinson," he recalled, "and the rich verse of Edwin Markham. But it's been quite a while since anybody tried," said the man whose Lincoln biography—six volumes, 500 anecdotes, and 20 years of research and writing—is probably the greatest work of its kind of this age.

It was a small group that he addressed, with no head table, no speeches, no seating arrangement, and no formal dress. They came from Chicago, Omaha, Memphis, Minneapolis, Cleveland and from among the tall towers of New York, to see Sandburg and listen to what he is thinking about.

There was the son of a Santa Fe station agent at Osage City, a YMCA director who sings folk songs, a representative of the Society of the Classic Guitar, and sundry important fellows who publish books, magazines and newspapers, but undoubtedly not timetables. Sandburg, who is much known as Carl, probably wouldn't have any use for timetables.

His Zest Is Shared

He spoke with quiet precision, and they shared his zest for life, and his taste for a few books, to be savored "like rare cheese." "I'm not going to be portentous," he said, "too many of these people here know whether I make noises when I sleep."

Sometimes he wandered momentarily from Lincoln, sprinkling side observations that glittered.

Of some modern poetry, he said, "Now, if you write what you mean, without needing the occult, you are out. You have to be obfuscatory."

New England's Robert Frost he praised as "the greatest American poet," but of T. S. Eliot, "the greatest British poet who ever came out of St. Louis, Mo.," he said, "He can have his Oxford movement. That's his business. But when he declares that in order to have culture, there must be custodians, and they must be of the elite . . ."

Humor Creeps In

He broke off, and back-country humor crept in. "Elite . . . that means cuts high up on the

haunch." He halted again, shook his unruly locks. "Mustn't get personal."

Although he has 4,000 books on Lincoln and 3,000 on other subjects, he has not read the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, 18th Century philosopher and writer, who believed in the superiority of the "noble savage" over civilized man. Said Sandburg, "When I found out it was an indispensable classic, I decided to avoid it. If I want to 'live dangerously' in a literary sort of way, I'll just look at a couple of old Socialist pamphlets that I wrote years ago."

He's given up cigar-smoking. "I guess my immunity ran out," he said. But he is still writing, and although he doesn't like the word "autobiography," that's what it is.

"I'm at the time of life when I can lie on my back and think about all the things I've done that most everybody else has done; too."



FIRE-LOGS—By Carl Sandburg

NANCY HANKS dreams by the fire;
Dreams, and the logs sputter,
And the yellow tongues climb.
Red lines lick their way in flickers.
Oh, sputter, logs.
Oh, dream, Nancy.
Time now for a beautiful child.
Time now for a tall man to come.

From "Corn Huskers"—Copyright, Henry Holt & Co.



